

# Switzerland

## Country Overview

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## Country name

Switzerland

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## Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is part of the childcare facilities and kindergartens, which is linked to elementary school. In Switzerland, national objectives are stipulated and monitored by The Confederation. Additionally, regional cantons may add objectives and quality indicators for ECEC. Curricula are organised based on the regional educational curriculum plans for each linguistic region (French, German, Italian). Although each canton can freely design its curriculum within these teaching objectives, a lot of similarities in the domains and areas remain. This is a result of the HarmoS Agreement, which stipulates the harmonisation of educational objectives in all cantons of Switzerland. The main challenge is quality control at the level where differences arise: the operational level and the methodology used. Especially for early childhood education and care, heterogeneity in implementation occurs, because this is solely the responsibility of cantons and municipalities. Because there is no confederational framework, a compulsory educational framework for quality control in ECEC is a challenge for the near future.

## Development

Switzerland is a federal state that is organised in three levels: the Confederation, the cantons and the communes. The cantons and communities are mandated to organise education. The official school language is French, German, Italian or Romansh, depending on the region (Faeh & Vogt, 2021).

In Switzerland, compulsory education starts at either 4 or 6 years of age. Before 6 years of age, children can attend preschool or nursery school for one or two years. Preschool starts at 4 years of age at the earliest and is compulsory in most of the cantons. However in some German speaking cantons, there is no obligation to attend preschool. Therefore, some children start at 5 or 6 years of age. Childcare refers to care for children under 4 years of age and is organised in private and public (state-run) facilities, so called Kintergartens, or creches. Childcare is organised under the responsibility of local/cantonal ministries of social affairs. In some cantons it is organised under the responsibility of the ministry of education (Expat guide to Switzerland, 2021)

From 0 to 4 years of age children may attend centre-based or family-based childcare, or kindergarten. Each region has its own characteristics. Faeh & Vogt (2021) describe better conditions in French speaking Switzerland compared to German and Italian speaking Switzerland. Since 2016, there is a national curriculum, and orientation framework for ECEC (Wustman, 2016). It formulates directions and guidelines for practitioners within ECEC and is based on the convention of the rights of the child.

Wustman, (2016) cited in Faeh & Vogt (2021, p.32):

Physical and mental wellbeing: A child who is well can be curious and active;

Communication: Children acquire a rich understanding of themselves and the world through exchange with others;

Belonging and participation: Every child wants to feel welcome and participate from birth;

Strengthening and empowerment: Reactions children experience in relation to them as a person or to their behaviour influence their self-perception;

Inclusion and acceptance of diversity: Every child needs a place in society;

Holistic and appropriate: Small children learn with all their senses, guided by their interests and previous experiences.

Since 2020, the Swiss childcare association issued quality guidelines for centre-based childcare. From 4 years of age, children can go to nursery school (Kindergarten or preschool). Kindergarten is part of the educational system and linked to primary school in Switzerland. It offers a mixture of guided and free play within a nationally harmonised curriculum. Kindergarten is part of the primary school educational system. National objectives (Nationale Bildungsziele) are applied to the basic areas for compulsory education: languages, mathematics and natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, music, art and design, and exercise and health. These national objectives harmonise objectives for the whole country. The educational standards for compulsory education are set by the Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education (HarmoS Konkordat). Regional legislatives in cantons and schools may add educational standards. The cantons develop the curricula, which are stipulated per language region. French-speaking cantons follow the "Plan d'études romand", German speaking cantons follow the "Lehrplan 21" and the Italian speaking canton Ticino follows the "Piano di studio". These comply with the HarmoS Agreement that stipulates the general national teaching objectives.

French speaking regions

SES-development is part of the global educational project that transversally intersects with the 5 basic disciplines (mathematics and sciences, languages, human sciences, arts, health education). These transversal capacities focus on self-development and are grouped in different domains: collaboration, communication, learning strategies, creative thinking and reflective skills (CIIP, 2021).

German and multilingual speaking regions

The Lehrplan 21 applies to all German speaking and multilingual cantons in Switzerland. Similar to the Plan d'études, it specifies teaching objectives for SES in transversal competencies. In the first cycle, development of pupils is strongly encouraged. The curriculum strongly focuses on: motor development, perception, temporal and spatial orientation, imagination and creativity, language and the ability to express themselves. 'Play' is an essential element of the teaching method (D-EDK, 2021).

Italian speaking regions

In accordance with the other linguistic areas, the educational plan 'Piano di studio' has a similar structure and teaching objective with specific disciplinary objectives, transversal objectives and general educational objectives. Development of the SES is part of the transversal objectives and has similar areas as the French speaking curriculum: collaboration, communication, learning strategies, creative thinking and reflective skills (Scuolalab, 2015).

## Assessment

Childcare Centres are not obliged to follow the orientation framework. In practice, this acts merely as a guiding function (Faeh & Vogt, 2021).

Evaluation of the educational programme in kindergarten (first cycle of primary education) is a cantonal matter. They are responsible for the curriculum and the compliance with the Intercantonal Agreement on Harmonisation of Compulsory Education (HarmoS Agreement). Assessment of pupils in the first grade is often without grades, but can be seen as an orientational assessment. In many cantons structured observational documents are used to evaluate pupils.

The entire Swiss educational system is structurally monitored. This quality assessment is the responsibility of both The Confederation and the cantons. The monitoring process is a 4-year cycle ("das Bildungsmonitoring"). Results are published in the Swiss Education Report, which covers all levels of compulsory education. As mentioned above, childcare is not included in the report. The educational objectives, including SES, are externally and internally evaluated at cantonal level. Article 3 of the HarmoS Agreement stipulates specific goals and socio emotional skills for primary school, as cited by Antognazza (2015, p. 199):

“Article 3: Basic education: During compulsory school all female and male students acquire and develop basic competences and knowledge, as well as cultural identity, which engages them in lifelong learning and enables them to find their own place in social and professional life”, and “The third paragraph mentions a wider dimension of basic education that, apart from its disciplines, promotes the development of the pupil as a person: Compulsory school facilitates in female and male students the development of an independent personality as well as the acquisition of social competences and the sense of responsibility towards other people and the environment”.

## Intervention

Because the main mandate for education in Switzerland is a cantonal affair, Switzerland has as many educational curricula as there are cantons: twenty-six (Antognazza, 2015). There is a great variety in implementation strategies of SES within the national and cantonal educational curricula. In the German speaking part of Switzerland, social and emotional skills and learning are fostered by focussing on implementing specific programmes, such as the PFADE programme. Antognazza (2015) describes three case studies to foster SES development in Swiss schools.

Interventions vary throughout Switzerland:

Example 1: in the bachelor programme for preservice teachers, a mandatory twenty-four hours course on social and emotional skills is offered. Because of the large interest of students, it is now structurally embedded in the curriculum.

Example 2: introduction of the Pfade programme (Programm zur Förderung Alternativer Denkstrategien or Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) in a large part of the German speaking primary schools. This programme focuses on the development of self-esteem, social skills and identity. It has gained popularity and acceptance, and in some cantons, public bodies even provide financial support for implementing the programme at primary school level.

Example 3: introduction of “the chameleon game” to encourage SES development for children from 4 to 10 years of age. This game is intended to teach children how to share and express their emotions.

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